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COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Evaluations separate PC facts from fantasies

If you're having a hard time keeping up with all the news about personal computers, don't despair. Here's a summary of the key news items that appeared last month, along with my evaluation of each.

✓ IBM PC Convertible in short supply. IBM's new portable computer, introduced a few months ago, is just now reaching many computer store shelves. IBM says that "demand for the PC Convertible has far and away exceeded our expectations . . . we are increasing production as rapidly as possible; however, there will be a slight delay of several months."

Originally, the machine was to be available in May. Now IBM says that dealer orders are backed up and some of the promised peripherals won't be available until August or September.

Evaluation: Despite what IBM is saying officially, dealers and buyers alike have been very cool to the new machine. Those who have used the PC Convertible complain about the hard-to-read screen, the slowness of the processor and its inability to use the standard-size diskettes of other IBM PCs. I would not be surprised if IBM is re-thinking its strategy regarding the product and has cut back production during this period. In the meantime, it might be best to hold off on any portable computer purchase decisions. Improved versions are probably on the way.

✓ ComputerLand and Businessland stores to sell house-brand PCs. A new development in computer retailing is the introduction of private-label IBM PC-compatible computers by two of the largest computer store chains. The ComputerLand machine is already being sold, and the Businessland model is scheduled for next month. Not surprisingly, each chain claims that its machines are fully compatible with the IBM models, packed with more features and less expensive.

Evaluation: Displaying so-called compatible machines side by side with IBM PCs has long been a successful sales strategy for computer

more astute to deal with the choices. Gone are the days, if they ever existed, when the salesman was on your side.

✓ IBM fixes some bugs but others remain in new PC keyboard. As reported several months ago, IBM released a new improved key-



Segal

board for its XT and AT model personal computers, called the Enhanced PC Keyboard. I tried it out, was impressed, and recommended that buyers order the new keyboard with all new machines. But as with most new computer-related products, various bugs and negative features were uncovered,

and IBM has taken steps to correct some of them. A patch disk called DOS 3.21 is now available.

Evaluation: While the patch corrects a few minor problems, two major ones remain that have caused consternation among new users of the keyboard and those wishing to upgrade to it. First, it turns out that some popular programs will not work properly with it, namely DESQview, Framework, and most keyboard enhancement packages. The developers of those programs are rushing to provide upgrades or new versions that do work, and some of these already are available. Even though obtaining the new software is an inconvenience for users, it's still worth the effort.

The second problem is harder, if not impossible, to solve. It seems that IBM made the new keyboard so different from the old one that current PC owners cannot be upgraded to use it. What a shame.

I think IBM is mistaken if it thinks that any of the 4.2 million owners of existing PCs are going to consider jacking their machines just to get the new keyboard. It was a terrible error for IBM not to offer its existing customers a reasonably priced upgrade. In short order, however, the alternative keyboard manufacturers are sure to provide us with Enhanced PC Keyboard-clones that do the trick.

✓ More "desk-top publishing" products announced. All kinds of products are now being offered

dealers. The IBM machine offered stability, reliability and safety; and the other typically provided more features, questionable compatibility and a lower price. Either one you choose, the store makes a sale. If the salesman is really good, he could objectively help you make a good decision based upon your needs — without having an incentive to sell you one over the other.

Now, by offering their own brands, any remaining objectivity of the store and salesman is compromised, mainly because the profit margin on the house brand is so much higher. That's not to say the concept won't work — stores such as Sears have been selling their own brand appliances for years — but it means customers need to be

prodded to buy the new equipment that are supposed to facilitate the in-house production of brochures, newsletters and advertisements — laser printers, graphics programs, page makeup programs, etc. The idea is for this high-tech gear to do away with commercial artists, typesetters and graphic designers.

Evaluation: It might take a few months or a year, but I predict that the entire concept of personal publishing will eventually become passe. The new, expensive equipment is simply today's artist's tools. They replace the razor knife, wax and light table, and make the artist more productive in many situations. But giving the new tools to a non-artist won't make him an artist, and that's the faulty premise of "desk-top publishing."

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